# From Oral Memory to Written Order: Myth, Geometry, and the Ontology of Writing on the Iranian Plateau.

**Tahmuras, Jiroft, and the Transformation of Language into Visual Form in Early Iranian Civilization.**

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## Mission Statement:

Persian Art Chronicle is an independent long-form research project by Maryam Gomizi- (Mary G) dedicated to documenting, analyzing, and interpreting the history of Iranian art from mythical antiquity to the contemporary era through an interdisciplinary artistic and scholarly perspective.

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## Abstract:

The emergence of writing constitutes one of the most transformative developments in human civilization. Conventional historical narratives frequently interpret early writing systems primarily as administrative technologies designed to facilitate accounting, taxation, and bureaucratic control. While such explanations possess considerable explanatory value, they often overlook broader cultural and ontological dimensions of inscription. This article examines the transition from oral memory to systems of writing on the Iranian Plateau through an interdisciplinary analysis integrating mythology, archaeology, visual culture, semiotics, and cultural memory studies. Particular attention is given to the mythological narrative of Tahmuras in the *Shahnameh*, where the king acquires thirty forms of writing from the *divs*, and to archaeological discoveries associated with the Jiroft civilization in southeastern Iran.

Rather than treating writing solely as a practical technology, this study argues that early systems of inscription on the Iranian Plateau functioned as interventions into material reality itself. Through the stabilization of language in visual form, writing transformed ephemeral speech into durable cultural memory. The article explores how geometric organization became a mechanism for imposing order upon linguistic and cosmological uncertainty, producing a convergence of aesthetics, administration, and political authority. Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of Ernst Cassirer, Jan Assmann, Michel Foucault, and material culture studies, the analysis demonstrates that inscriptional systems in early Iran embodied both communicative and ontological functions.

The study further argues that the geometric tendencies visible in Jiroft inscriptions reveal an alternative conception of writing in which visual order preceded or accompanied phonetic representation. In this context, writing emerges not merely as a vehicle for language but as a technology of spatial organization. The article concludes that the origins of writing on the Iranian Plateau should be understood not only as a history of communication but also as a history of visual form, political legitimacy, and cultural memory.



**Keywords:** Writing Systems; Tahmuras; Jiroft Civilization; Cultural Memory; Iranian Art History; Semiotics

## 1-Introduction:

The invention of writing is often described as one of the decisive thresholds separating prehistory from history. Through writing, societies acquire the ability to preserve information beyond the limitations of individual memory and oral transmission. Consequently, writing has traditionally been interpreted as a technological solution to practical problems of administration, economic management, and political organization (Goody, 1986; Postgate, Wang, & Wilkinson, 1995). Although such interpretations remain influential, they represent only one dimension of a far more complex phenomenon. Writing is not merely a means of recording information. It is also a process through which language becomes material, memory becomes durable, and authority becomes visible. The emergence of inscription fundamentally alters the relationship between humans, objects, and time.

On the Iranian Plateau, questions concerning the origins and meaning of writing acquire additional significance because they intersect with both mythological traditions and archaeological discoveries. The narrative of Tahmuras in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* presents writing as a form of knowledge acquired through confrontation with the *divs* (Ferdowsi, 2006; Khaleghi-Motlagh, 1988–2008). Meanwhile, archaeological investigations at Jiroft and related sites have revealed inscriptional materials whose geometric characteristics challenge conventional assumptions regarding the development of writing systems in ancient Iran (Majidzadeh, 2003; 2008).

This article does not seek to establish direct historical connections between mythological narratives and archaeological evidence. Such an approach would violate essential distinctions between mythology, cultural memory, and historical reconstruction. Instead, the objective is to examine how both bodies of evidence contribute to broader understandings of writing as a cultural phenomenon. The central argument advanced here is that writing on the Iranian Plateau should be interpreted not only as a technology of communication but also as a technology of ontological ordering. Through inscription, language acquires spatial permanence. Through geometry, meaning acquires form. Through writing, political power acquires mechanisms for preserving itself across generations. The study therefore investigates three interconnected questions. First, how does the mythological narrative of Tahmuras conceptualize writing as a transformative technology? Second, what do archaeological discoveries from Jiroft suggest regarding the relationship between geometry and inscription? Third, how did the visual dimensions of writing contribute to later developments in Iranian artistic traditions?

## 2-Historical and Cultural Context:

Understanding the emergence of writing on the Iranian Plateau requires consideration of broader regional developments throughout the fourth and third millennia BCE. During this period, societies across Western Asia experienced increasing social complexity, economic specialization, and political centralization (Algaze, 2008). The rise of urban centers generated new demands for systems capable of organizing information. Administrative records, commercial transactions, property management, and ritual practices all benefited from technologies of preservation and transmission. Within Mesopotamia, these developments contributed to the emergence of cuneiform writing, one of the earliest documented writing systems in human history (Nissen, Damerow, & Englund, 1993).

The Iranian Plateau participated actively in these wider processes while simultaneously developing distinctive cultural trajectories. Archaeological evidence demonstrates extensive networks connecting Iranian communities with neighboring regions through trade, technological exchange, and cultural interaction (Potts, 1999). Yet Iranian material culture often exhibits characteristics that distinguish it from contemporary Mesopotamian traditions. One notable feature is the persistent emphasis upon geometric organization. Geometric abstraction appears in ceramics, architectural decoration, seals, and other visual media throughout multiple periods of Iranian history (Ghirshman, 1954).

This tendency raises important questions concerning the relationship between visual order and systems of inscription. If writing is fundamentally a visual technology, then regional preferences regarding visual organization may influence how inscription develops and functions. The mythological tradition preserved in the *Shahnameh* offers a particularly revealing perspective. In the reign of Tahmuras, the acquisition of writing is portrayed as a decisive moment in civilizational development. The king's victory over the *divs* culminates not merely in military triumph but in access to knowledge itself. Such narratives belong to the realm of cultural memory rather than historical documentation. Nevertheless, they reveal how later Iranian traditions conceptualized the origins of literacy. Writing appears not as a mundane administrative innovation but as a transformative technology capable of reshaping relationships between power, knowledge, and civilization.

## 3-Literature Review:

Scholarly interpretations of early writing have generally developed along three major trajectories: administrative-functional theories, semiotic approaches, and cultural-memory frameworks. Administrative theories emphasize the practical origins of writing. Scholars such as Denise Schmandt-Besserat (1992) and Robert Englund have argued that writing emerged from increasingly sophisticated accounting systems designed to manage economic information. From this perspective, writing evolved gradually from numerical tokens and administrative devices into more complex inscriptional systems.

These models have proven highly influential because they are strongly supported by archaeological evidence from Mesopotamia. However, critics have noted that functional explanations sometimes understate the symbolic and cultural dimensions of writing (Goody, 1986). Semiotic approaches emphasize writing as a system of signs rather than merely a recording device. Roland Barthes (1977) and Umberto Eco (1976) demonstrated that sign systems operate within broader cultural frameworks that shape interpretation and meaning. Writing therefore functions simultaneously as communication and representation.

Within Iranian studies, scholarship concerning writing has often focused upon epigraphy, manuscript traditions, and administrative history. Ahmad Tafazzoli (1997) emphasized the cultural prestige associated with literacy and scribal practices in pre-Islamic Iran. His work demonstrates that writing frequently possessed religious and cosmological significance beyond administrative functions. Research concerning Jiroft has generated particularly significant debates. Yusef Majidzadeh (2003; 2008) proposed that inscriptions discovered in the Halil Rud region may represent indigenous developments distinct from Mesopotamian traditions. Although interpretations remain contested, the discoveries have stimulated renewed discussion regarding the diversity of early writing systems.

Theoretical contributions from Jan Assmann (2011) provide another important framework. Assmann distinguishes between communicative memory and cultural memory, arguing that writing enables societies to preserve knowledge beyond the limits of living generations. Inscription thus transforms memory itself. Similarly, Ernst Cassirer (1946) emphasized humanity's capacity to construct symbolic forms through which reality becomes intelligible. Writing may therefore be understood not merely as representation but as a symbolic intervention into the world. Taken

together, these scholarly traditions suggest that writing should be analyzed as a phenomenon operating simultaneously within administrative, visual, symbolic, and political domains.

## 4-Theoretical Framework:

The present study draws upon four complementary theoretical perspectives: symbolic form theory, cultural memory studies, semiotics, and theories of power-knowledge. Together, these approaches provide a framework capable of examining writing not merely as a communicative technology but as a cultural mechanism that reorganizes relationships between language, memory, materiality, and authority. Ernst Cassirer's theory of symbolic forms provides an essential starting point. Cassirer argued that human beings do not engage reality directly but rather through symbolic systems that structure perception and meaning (Cassirer, 1946). Language, myth, religion, and art are therefore not secondary reflections of reality but constitutive frameworks through which reality becomes intelligible. Writing represents a particularly significant symbolic form because it transforms linguistic expression into durable visual structure.

This perspective is especially relevant when considering the Iranian myth of Tahmuras. Within the epic narrative, writing emerges not as a neutral tool but as a transformative symbolic technology. The acquisition of "thirty forms of writing" signifies entry into a new mode of cultural existence, one in which memory and authority can be materially stabilized. A second theoretical foundation derives from Jan Assmann's concept of cultural memory. Assmann distinguishes between communicative memory, which depends upon living interpersonal transmission, and cultural memory, which relies upon durable symbolic media such as texts, monuments, and ritual practices (Assmann, 2011). Writing occupies a central position within this framework because it enables knowledge to survive beyond the lifespan of its creators.

The transition from oral tradition to inscription therefore represents more than a technical innovation. It constitutes a transformation in how societies relate to time. Oral memory is dynamic, adaptive, and vulnerable to loss. Written memory becomes fixed, transferable, and potentially permanent. Semiotic theory provides a third analytical lens. The works of Barthes (1977) and Eco (1976) emphasize that signs possess visual as well as linguistic dimensions. Writing systems do not merely encode sounds; they generate visual structures that participate in broader systems of cultural meaning. This observation is particularly important for understanding the geometric

characteristics associated with early inscriptional materials from the Iranian Plateau. If writing is simultaneously visual and linguistic, then geometric organization itself becomes a significant component of meaning production.

Finally, the study draws upon Michel Foucault's analysis of the relationship between knowledge and power. Foucault argued that systems of knowledge are inseparable from systems of authority (Foucault, 1972). Writing facilitates administration, classification, regulation, and historical continuity. Consequently, the emergence of writing transforms political structures as well as cultural practices. The mythological narrative of Tahmuras illustrates this dynamic with remarkable clarity. By acquiring the knowledge possessed by the *divs*, the king secures not only information but also legitimacy. Writing becomes a mechanism through which power is preserved, transmitted, and institutionalized. Together, these theoretical perspectives support a broader interpretation of writing as an ontological technology: a system through which societies organize reality, memory, and authority into durable forms.

## 5-Methodology:

This article employs an interdisciplinary qualitative methodology integrating textual analysis, archaeological interpretation, visual culture studies, semiotic analysis, and historiographical review.

The research is based upon four categories of evidence:

1. Mythological narratives, particularly the account of Tahmuras in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*.
2. Archaeological evidence associated with the Jiroft cultural sphere and related Iranian sites.
3. Art historical materials including manuscript painting and calligraphic traditions.
4. Scholarly interpretations drawn from archaeology, Iranian studies, cultural memory theory, and semiotics.

The methodology deliberately distinguishes among mythology, cultural memory, archaeology, and history. Mythological narratives are treated as symbolic frameworks that preserve cultural meanings rather than literal historical records. Archaeological evidence is analyzed according to material and contextual criteria. Historical interpretations are evaluated through historiographical comparison. The study employs comparative analysis to examine similarities and differences

between Mesopotamian and Iranian approaches to inscription. It also utilizes iconographic analysis when discussing manuscript imagery associated with Tahmuras and scribal traditions. Visual culture analysis is applied to the geometric characteristics of inscriptional forms, while semiotic interpretation explores the relationship between visual order and systems of meaning.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. The decipherment and interpretation of materials associated with Jiroft remain subjects of scholarly debate. Consequently, conclusions concerning these inscriptions are necessarily provisional. Likewise, the *Shahnameh* cannot be treated as direct evidence for prehistoric events. Its value lies in the preservation of cultural memory rather than historical documentation. The methodology therefore seeks neither to historicize myth nor mythologize archaeology. Instead, it investigates how different forms of evidence contribute to understanding the cultural significance of writing.

## 6-Main Analysis:

### The Dialectic of Power and the Technology of Inscription in the Myth of Tahmuras:

Among the many technological achievements attributed to legendary rulers in Iranian tradition, none possesses greater cultural significance than the acquisition of writing. In the reign of Tahmuras, Ferdowsi describes how the king defeats the *divs* and compels them to reveal thirty forms of writing (Ferdowsi, 2006; Khaleghi-Motlagh, 2008). At first glance, the episode appears to conform to familiar mythological patterns involving heroic conquest. Yet a closer examination reveals that the true object of victory is not territory, wealth, or military dominance. It is knowledge.

The *divs* occupy an ambiguous position within Iranian mythological imagination. Modern readers frequently interpret them as demonic beings analogous to supernatural entities found in other traditions. However, many scholars have suggested more complex readings. Christensen (1993) argued that mythological antagonists often preserve memories of cultural "others"—foreign groups, indigenous populations, or communities possessing specialized forms of knowledge. Whether or not such interpretations can be historically verified, they illuminate the symbolic logic of the narrative. The *divs* function as custodians of technologies not yet incorporated into the central structures of civilization. Their defeat represents the transfer of expertise from the margins to the center.

Figure 1 is relevant to this discussion because manuscript depictions of Tahmuras frequently emphasize not violence but submission and instruction. The *divs* are often shown teaching, writing, or presenting knowledge to the king. Such imagery reflects a remarkable cultural memory: civilization advances through the acquisition of technical expertise rather than through destruction alone.

**Figure 1:** Tahmuras Defeats the Divs, folio from the Shahnama (Book of Kings) of Shah Tahmasp, attributed to Sultan Muhammad or his circle, c. 1520–25, Tabriz, Iran. Opaque watercolor, ink, silver, and gold on paper. The scene illustrates the mythical subjugation of the divs, leading to the externalization of knowledge and thirty forms of writing. Currently in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Accession Number: 1988.430).

This interpretation aligns closely with Foucault's observation that power increasingly depends upon the control of knowledge systems (Foucault, 1972). The ruler who acquires writing gains access to mechanisms capable of extending authority beyond immediate physical presence. Oral societies depend heavily upon personal memory and direct transmission. Knowledge remains vulnerable to distortion, loss, and fragmentation. Writing fundamentally alters this condition by creating durable records capable of surviving temporal discontinuities. The acquisition of writing therefore constitutes a shift from personal authority to institutional authority. Commands can be preserved. Genealogies can be stabilized. Laws can be recorded. Historical narratives can be controlled. In this sense, the myth of Tahmuras describes what might be termed a technological revolution of sovereignty.

The episode also reveals an important relationship between writing and legitimacy. By presenting literacy as a rare and difficult acquisition, the narrative elevates writing above ordinary technical skills. Inscription becomes a marker of civilizational maturity and political authority. Ahmad Tafazzoli observed that scribal culture in pre-Islamic Iran frequently possessed sacred dimensions extending beyond practical administration (Tafazzoli, 1997). Literacy often functioned within broader cosmological frameworks linking earthly governance to divine order.

The Tahmuras narrative reflects precisely such assumptions. Writing is not merely useful; it is transformative. It enables participation in a more ordered and enduring reality. The significance of this transformation becomes clearer when viewed through the lens of cultural memory. Oral traditions preserve narratives through repetition, performance, and communal participation. Written traditions preserve them through material inscription. Assmann's distinction between communicative memory and cultural memory is particularly illuminating here (Assmann, 2011). The acquisition of writing marks the moment at which memory becomes externalized. Knowledge is no longer confined to living individuals but becomes embedded within material objects.

Consequently, the victory of Tahmuras may be interpreted as a victory over forgetfulness itself. The episode also introduces a theme that will remain central throughout Iranian intellectual history: the relationship between order and form. Writing organizes language spatially. Speech unfolds in time, but inscription occupies space. Through writing, the fluidity of oral expression is transformed into visible structure. This transformation establishes the conceptual foundation for later Iranian traditions of calligraphy, manuscript production, and visual culture. Writing becomes

both language and image. The implications of this development extend far beyond administration. Writing begins to function as a medium through which reality itself is ordered, classified, and preserved. The next stage of this investigation therefore turns from mythology to archaeology, examining how concepts of order, geometry, and inscription appear within the material evidence of the Jiroft civilization.

**The Ontology of Form and the Geometry of Signs in the Jiroft Civilization:**

If the myth of Tahmuras preserves a symbolic memory of the acquisition of writing, the archaeological discoveries associated with the Jiroft cultural sphere provide an opportunity to examine how inscription functioned within material reality. Although direct connections between mythological traditions and archaeological evidence cannot be established, both domains illuminate a shared concern with the relationship between order, knowledge, and permanence. The discoveries made in the Halil Rud basin have attracted significant scholarly attention because they challenge long-standing assumptions regarding the cultural geography of early civilization in the ancient Near East (Majidzadeh, 2003; 2008). Excavations revealed a complex cultural landscape characterized by monumental architecture, elaborate stone vessels, administrative objects, and inscriptional materials.

Among the most intriguing discoveries are objects bearing signs whose formal characteristics differ from conventional Mesopotamian cuneiform systems. While debates continue concerning chronology, decipherment, and cultural affiliation, the visual structure of these inscriptions remains noteworthy. Unlike writing systems primarily associated with linear phonetic notation, the Jiroft signs often emphasize geometric arrangement, symmetry, and spatial organization. Their visual impact derives not only from the individual signs themselves but also from their relationships within larger compositional structures. Figure 2 demonstrates examples of inscriptional materials from the Jiroft region. What immediately attracts attention is the prominence of geometric order. Signs appear integrated into carefully structured visual fields rather than functioning merely as isolated communicative units.

**Figure 2:** Proto-Elamite Administrative Clay Tablet, excavated from Tepe Yahya, Kerman, Iran, dating to c. 3000 BCE. The inscription demonstrates early geometric sorting and accounting signs organized in structured horizontal registers. Currently on display at the National Museum of Iran, Tehran (Photo: Suzuki Kaku / Alamy Stock Photo).

From the perspective of visual culture studies, this characteristic is highly significant. Writing systems do not simply record language; they construct visible forms through which language becomes materially present. In Jiroft, visual organization appears to occupy a particularly prominent role. Majidzadeh has argued that the archaeological evidence suggests the existence of local traditions of inscription whose development cannot be reduced entirely to Mesopotamian influence (Majidzadeh, 2008). While many scholars remain cautious regarding such conclusions, the discoveries nevertheless highlight the diversity of inscriptional practices across the ancient Near East. The question at stake is not merely whether a particular script originated independently. More fundamentally, it concerns how different societies conceptualized the relationship between language and form.

Mesopotamian cuneiform evolved largely through administrative contexts emphasizing record keeping and economic management (Nissen et al., 1993). In contrast, the visual emphasis observable in many Jiroft materials suggests that inscription may also have functioned as an exercise in spatial ordering. This distinction should not be exaggerated into a rigid binary. Mesopotamian writing possessed aesthetic dimensions, and Iranian inscriptional traditions certainly served administrative purposes. Nevertheless, differences in visual emphasis remain

analytically meaningful. From a semiotic perspective, the geometric organization of signs contributes directly to meaning production. Signs acquire significance not only through linguistic reference but also through spatial arrangement. Geometry itself becomes communicative. This observation resonates with Cassirer's theory of symbolic forms. Writing does not merely represent reality; it reorganizes reality into structures that can be perceived, interpreted, and preserved (Cassirer, 1946).

The Jiroft evidence therefore encourages a reconsideration of writing as a spatial technology. Through geometry, inscription transforms language into architecture. Meaning is no longer transmitted solely through sound but through visual order. The implications of this transformation extend far beyond literacy itself. Once language becomes visible, it becomes available for artistic manipulation, political display, and symbolic elaboration. The emergence of writing thus marks the beginning of a new relationship between communication and visual culture.

**From Linguistic Chaos to Geometric Order:**

One of the most remarkable consequences of inscription is its capacity to impose structure upon linguistic fluidity. Spoken language exists only in time. Once uttered, words disappear unless preserved through memory. Writing interrupts this transience by converting temporal expression into spatial form. This transformation may be understood as a movement from what might metaphorically be described as linguistic chaos toward geometric order. The phrase should not be interpreted literally. Oral cultures possess sophisticated systems of organization and memory. Nevertheless, speech remains inherently dynamic. Its preservation depends upon continuous performance and transmission.

Writing alters these conditions fundamentally. Words acquire fixed positions. Sequences become stable. Information can be revisited, copied, compared, and accumulated. This process creates new possibilities for administration, law, religion, and historical consciousness. More importantly for the present study, it creates new possibilities for visual organization. The geometric tendencies visible in many early inscriptional traditions reveal that writing is not simply linguistic. It is also architectural. Every inscription occupies space. Every sign possesses form. Every written surface constitutes a designed environment. Figure 3 illustrates geometric characteristics commonly associated with inscriptional and decorative systems in early Iranian material culture.

**Figure 3:** Spouted Vessel with Geometric and Solar Motifs, painted ceramic from Tepe Sialk (Kashan), Iran, Iron Age/Late Bronze Age, c. 1000–800 BCE. Currently preserved in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Photo: Fabienkhan, via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 2.5).

The significance of geometry within these systems extends beyond aesthetics. Geometry provides predictability, repetition, and structure. Through geometric organization, complex information becomes manageable. Foucault's discussions of classification and order are particularly relevant here (Foucault, 1970). Systems of knowledge depend upon mechanisms capable of organizing information into stable categories. Writing provides precisely such mechanisms. The emergence of inscription therefore represents a broader epistemological transformation. Knowledge becomes something that can be stored, arranged, and retrieved independently of individual memory. Political institutions quickly recognized the advantages of such technologies. Administrative records facilitate taxation. Legal documents stabilize authority. Historical texts legitimize dynasties. Consequently, writing becomes inseparable from governance.

Yet the Iranian evidence suggests that inscription possessed additional dimensions. Geometric order appears not merely as a practical necessity but as a cultural value in its own right. The visual arrangement of signs communicates ideals of balance, permanence, and control.Such characteristics help explain why writing would later become so closely associated with artistic production. Before writing could become calligraphy, however, it first had to become form. To systematically visualize these epistemological distinctions, Table 1 summarizes the structural, functional, and ontological contrasts between the Mesopotamian administrative model and the Iranian geometric paradigm.

**Table 1:** Comparative Matrix of Early Inscriptional Paradigms (Mesopotamian vs. Iranian Plateau)

| Analytic Dimension | Mesopotamian Cuneiform Model | Iranian Plateau Inscriptional Model (e.g., Jiroft / Proto-Elamite) |
|---|---|---|
| **Primary Functional Catalyst** | Administrative necessity, economic tracking, taxation, and centralized bureaucratic record-keeping. | Ontological ordering, spatial stabilization of symbols, and cosmological integration alongside administration. |
| **Visual & Structural Logic** | Linear, stylus-impressed wedge marks optimized for swift economic notation and register entries. | Highly geometric, symmetrical, and patterned compositions embedded into material media (soft stone, ceramic). |
| **Ontological Status of the Sign** | Utilitarian tool separating linguistic signifier from the underlying material vessel. | Material intervention where geometry, physical substrate, and sign form an inseparable symbolic whole. |
| **Relationship to Knowledge & Myth** | Progressive institutional development linked to scribal guilds and city-state governance. | Mythologized technology linked to confrontation with alterity (*divs*) and sacred civilizational transmission. |
| **Visual Legacy** | Standardized, highly functional epigraphic scripts serving official state archives. | Visual-spatial matrix influencing later traditions of geometric ornamentation, manuscript layout, and calligraphy. |

**Writing as Material Intervention:**

Traditional histories of writing frequently describe inscription as a medium through which information is transmitted. While accurate, this description remains incomplete. Writing also alters the material world itself. When a sign is incised into clay, carved into stone, painted onto a surface, or inscribed onto metal, language becomes part of material reality. Speech is no longer ephemeral. It acquires weight, texture, durability, and spatial presence. This transformation has profound ontological implications.

The act of inscription changes both the object receiving the sign and the meaning carried by the sign. Material and language become inseparable. The written artifact becomes a hybrid entity combining physical substance and symbolic content. Figure 4 demonstrates examples of inscribed objects whose significance derives equally from their material presence and their communicative function.

**Figure 4:** *Cylindrical Soft Stone (Chlorite) Vessel*, from the Jiroft culture, c. 2000–1800 BCE, adorned with carved palm tree designs and structured linear borders. Excavated from the Saar necropolis, this artifact exemplifies writing as a material intervention, where symbolic meaning and physical substance converge (Photo: Ruelleruelle / Alamy Stock Photo).

Material culture scholars have repeatedly emphasized that objects are not passive containers of meaning (Miller, 2005). Rather, objects participate actively in cultural processes. Written artifacts exemplify this principle with particular clarity. A clay tablet is not merely a vehicle for language. It is a material event. The inscription modifies the object and simultaneously modifies the social world within which the object circulates.

This observation helps explain why writing frequently acquires sacred or ceremonial significance. The inscription is not simply information. It is a visible manifestation of order imposed upon matter. The Tahmuras narrative may therefore be interpreted as preserving a symbolic memory of this transformation. By acquiring writing, humanity gains the capacity to intervene in reality through signs. Language becomes architecture. Memory becomes object. Authority becomes visible. The emergence of writing thus represents not only a communicative revolution but also a transformation in the relationship between humans and the material world.

**The Miniaturist, the Scribe, and the Sacred Reconstruction of Writing:**

The intellectual and visual consequences of early inscriptional culture did not end with the emergence of writing systems themselves. Across subsequent centuries, writing evolved into one of the defining artistic principles of Iranian civilization. This transformation reached one of its most sophisticated expressions in manuscript painting and calligraphic culture, where writing ceased to function solely as a communicative medium and became a visual and metaphysical structure.

The relationship between text and image in Iranian art differs significantly from many Western artistic traditions. Whereas Renaissance visual culture often sought to separate textual and pictorial domains through perspectival realism, Persian manuscript traditions frequently integrated writing, ornament, geometry, and image into unified compositional systems (Grabar, 1987). This integration reflects a deeper philosophical continuity. If writing originally emerged as a technology for imposing order upon language, later artistic traditions transformed that ordering principle into an aesthetic ideal. Figure 5 illustrates manuscript imagery depicting Tahmuras and the *divs* in Persian epic painting traditions.

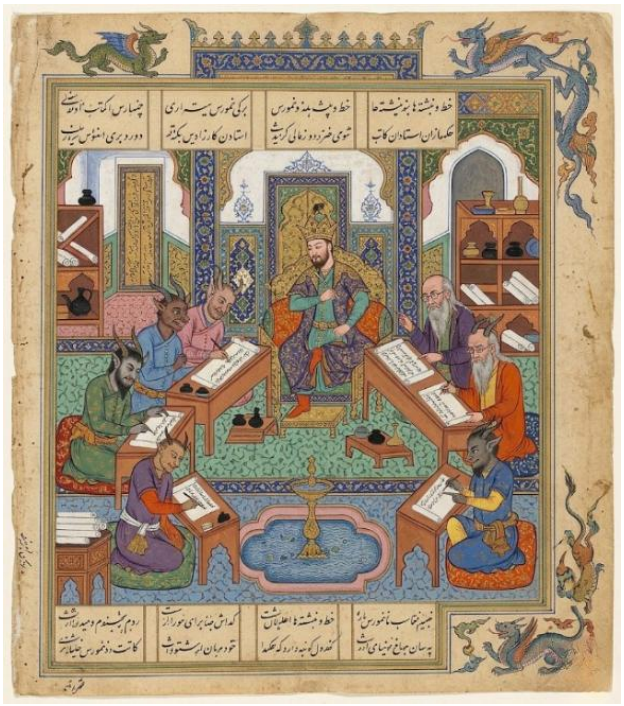

**Figure 5:** The Visual Ecology of the Scribe, a Persian miniature painting depicting a scholarly and scribal environment, demonstrating the geometric structure of the page layout and the institutional transmission of literacy. Period: Safavid era, mid-16th century. The composition reflects the artistic reinterpretation of textual order and administrative space as discussed in cultural memory studies.

In such representations, the *divs* often appear not merely as monstrous adversaries but as participants in the transmission of knowledge. Their visual depiction frequently emphasizes acts of instruction, inscription, and technical labor. This iconographic pattern is remarkable because it transforms the mythological conflict into a pedagogical relationship. Civilization emerges through the acquisition of knowledge rather than through simple annihilation of the Other.

From the perspective of cultural memory studies, these images perform an important function. They preserve and reinterpret foundational narratives concerning literacy, authority, and technological transformation (Assmann, 2011). The painter becomes a mediator between past and present. The manuscript page becomes a space in which mythology, history, and visual culture converge.

Such works reveal that the story of writing remained culturally productive long after the emergence of actual literacy systems. The myth continued to provide symbolic frameworks through which later generations interpreted their own artistic practices. The miniaturist, in effect, reenacted the civilizational act attributed to Tahmuras. Just as the legendary king transformed knowledge into order, the painter transformed narrative into geometry.

**Calligraphy and the Geometry of Meaning:**

The culmination of this process appears in the development of Islamic Persian calligraphy. Although separated from prehistoric inscriptional systems by millennia of historical change, Persian calligraphy preserves several conceptual continuities relevant to the present study. Most importantly, calligraphy treats writing as a visual form whose aesthetic qualities are inseparable from its communicative function. In many traditions of Persian calligraphy, the beauty of a text depends not only upon linguistic content but also upon proportion, rhythm, balance, and geometric organization (Blair, 2006). Figure 6 demonstrates examples of classical Persian calligraphic composition.

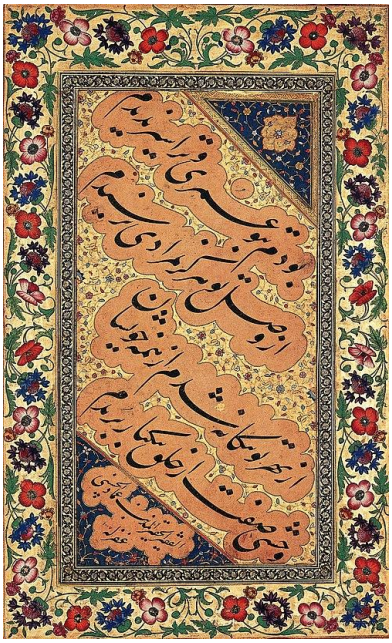

**Figure 6:** *Illuminated Chalipa Page in Nasta'liq Script*, signed by Mir 'Imad al-Hasani, dated 1016 AH (c. 1607 CE), Safavid era, Isfahan, Iran. Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper. This masterpiece demonstrates the ultimate synthesis of calligraphic geometry and spatial matrix, where the diagonal orientation of text creates a self-contained architecture of meaning. Preserved in the Public Domain (via Wikimedia Commons, File ID: 17275541).

The calligrapher operates simultaneously as writer, designer, and architect of space. Letters are arranged according to systems of proportion that transform language into visual structure. This phenomenon supports the broader argument advanced throughout the present study: writing on the Iranian Plateau cannot be understood solely as a medium of communication. It also functions as a medium of spatial organization. The geometric tendencies observed in early inscriptional materials find distant echoes within calligraphic practice. Although direct genealogical connections cannot always be demonstrated, both traditions reveal an enduring concern with the ordering potential of form.

The written sign becomes a site where language and geometry intersect. This intersection helps explain why calligraphy occupied such an elevated position within Iranian visual culture. Unlike representational painting, calligraphy could simultaneously convey meaning and embody order. The visual beauty of the script was not an ornament added to language. It was part of language itself. The calligrapher therefore inherited a role that had once belonged to the mythological scribe. Through form, meaning became visible. Through geometry, language acquired permanence.

**Writing, Administration, and Political Legitimacy:**

The aesthetic dimensions of writing should not obscure its political functions. From the earliest inscriptional systems to the bureaucratic structures of historical empires, writing remained deeply connected to authority. The capacity to record information transformed governance. Taxation, diplomacy, legal administration, territorial management, and dynastic succession all depended increasingly upon written documentation (Goody, 1986). The relationship between writing and power is evident across multiple historical periods. A ruler capable of preserving decrees through inscription possessed advantages unavailable to purely oral systems of governance. Writing extended authority across both space and time. Orders could travel beyond the physical presence of the ruler. Policies could survive beyond the lifespan of their creators. Histories could be curated and transmitted according to institutional priorities.

Foucault's concept of power-knowledge is particularly useful here (Foucault, 1972). Systems of administration rely upon systems of classification, documentation, and preservation. Writing enables each of these processes. The myth of Tahmuras can therefore be reinterpreted as a narrative concerning the acquisition of administrative capacity.The king does not merely gain knowledge. He gains the means to stabilize authority. In this context, literacy becomes a political technology. The written document becomes an instrument of governance. The archive becomes a mechanism of continuity. This dynamic helps explain why scribes occupied privileged positions in many ancient societies. Their expertise allowed political institutions to transform memory into infrastructure. Writing became one of the foundations of statecraft.

**Cultural Memory and the Permanence of Inscription:**

Perhaps the most enduring consequence of writing lies in its relationship to memory. Oral traditions preserve the past through repetition and performance. Written traditions preserve it through material endurance. Both systems possess strengths and limitations. Oral traditions remain flexible and adaptive. Written traditions provide stability and longevity. Assmann's theory of cultural memory emphasizes that societies construct identities through durable symbolic media (Assmann, 2011). Writing is among the most powerful of such media because it enables communication across generations. Through inscription, the dead continue to speak. The past remains accessible. Collective identities acquire continuity. This process transforms historical consciousness itself.

A society possessing writing can accumulate knowledge in ways unavailable to purely oral cultures. Records can be compared, revised, copied, and transmitted. Memory becomes externalized. The archive becomes an extension of consciousness. The significance of this transformation cannot be overstated. Entire traditions of scholarship, law, religion, and art depend upon the existence of durable textual records. The Iranian Plateau participated actively in this broader human development while generating distinctive visual and cultural responses to the problem of inscription. The emphasis upon geometry, form, and aesthetic organization suggests that writing was never regarded solely as a practical necessity. It was also understood as an ordering principle—a means of giving permanence to meaning, a method of transforming language into visible structure.

**Writing as an Artistic Ontology:**

The evidence examined throughout this study ultimately points toward a broader interpretation of inscription. Writing should not be understood merely as a technology. It should also be understood as an ontology of form. From the mythological narrative of Tahmuras to the geometric inscriptions of Jiroft and the refined aesthetics of Persian calligraphy, a recurring pattern becomes visible.

Writing repeatedly appears as a mechanism for converting instability into order. Speech becomes text. Memory becomes artifact. Authority becomes archive. Geometry becomes meaning. The significance of writing therefore extends beyond literacy itself. It reshapes relationships between humans and materiality, between language and image, between power and memory. Writing becomes one of the primary means through which civilization renders itself durable.

## 7-Discussion:

The preceding analysis suggests that conventional explanations of writing as a purely administrative technology are insufficient to account for the complexity of inscriptional culture on the Iranian Plateau. While administrative functions undoubtedly played an important role, archaeological, artistic, and mythological evidence collectively indicate broader cultural dimensions. Writing functioned simultaneously as communication, visual organization, political technology, and cultural memory. Its significance cannot be reduced to any single domain. The evidence examined throughout this article also suggests that the emergence of writing on the Iranian Plateau cannot be understood exclusively through diffusionist models. While extensive

interaction undoubtedly existed between Iranian societies and neighboring civilizations, particularly Mesopotamia, local developments reveal distinctive approaches to visual organization and symbolic representation (Potts, 1999; Majidzadeh, 2008).

The archaeological materials associated with Jiroft are especially important in this regard. Regardless of ongoing debates concerning chronology and decipherment, the geometric emphasis observable within many artifacts indicates a cultural environment in which visual order possessed exceptional significance. Such evidence encourages scholars to consider inscription not merely as a linguistic technology but as a spatial and aesthetic practice.

At the same time, mythological narratives preserve a parallel intellectual tradition. The story of Tahmuras does not describe writing as an administrative necessity. Instead, it portrays literacy as a transformative acquisition capable of altering the relationship between knowledge and authority. This symbolic framing reveals how later Iranian cultural memory interpreted the origins of civilization itself. The comparison between mythology and archaeology is therefore productive not because one confirms the other, but because both illuminate recurring cultural concerns. In each case, writing is associated with order, permanence, and the domestication of complexity. The persistence of these themes across millennia suggests that inscription occupied a position extending beyond practical communication. Writing became a framework through which societies conceptualized memory, legitimacy, and cultural continuity.

Moreover, the visual dimensions of writing played a crucial role in this process. The geometric organization evident in early inscriptional materials finds later echoes in manuscript production, calligraphic traditions, architectural ornament, and broader Iranian visual culture. Such continuities do not imply direct historical transmission in every instance. Rather, they reveal enduring preferences concerning the relationship between form and meaning. The Iranian case therefore contributes to broader theoretical discussions regarding the nature of writing itself. Instead of viewing inscription as a secondary representation of speech, it may be more productive to understand writing as a distinct mode of cultural production operating simultaneously within linguistic, visual, and political domains .The long-term cultural continuity traced throughout this study—from prehistoric geometric motifs to classical Persian calligraphy—can be conceptualized as a unified developmental arc, as illustrated in **Figure 7** below:

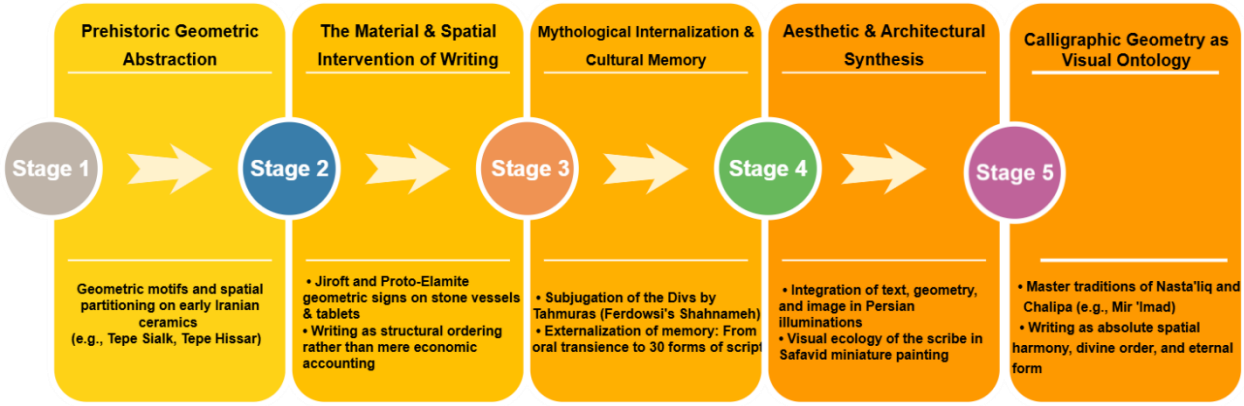
Prehistoric Geometric Abstraction
Stage 1
Geometric motifs and spatial partitioning on early Iranian ceramics (e.g., Tepe Sialk, Tepe Hissar)
The Material & Spatial Intervention of Writing
Stage 2
• Jiroft and Proto-Elamite geometric signs on stone vessels & tablets
• Writing as structural ordering rather than mere economic accounting
Mythological Internalization & Cultural Memory
Stage 3
• Subjugation of the Divs by Tahmuras (Ferdowsi's Shahnameh)
• Externalization of memory: From oral transience to 30 forms of scripi
Aesthetic & Architectural Synthesis
Stage 4
• Integration of text, geometry, and image in Persian illuminations
• Visual ecology of the scribe in Safavid miniature painting
Calligraphic Geometry as Visual Ontology
Stage 5
• Master traditions of Nasta'liq and Chalipa (e.g., Mir 'Imad)
• Writing as absolute spatial harmony, divine order, and eternal form

**Figure 7:** *Conceptual Trajectory of Inscriptional Ontology on the Iranian Plateau*. A theoretical flowchart illustrating the 5,000-year evolution of writing—from prehistoric geometric ceramics and Jiroft inscriptional forms to the mythological internalization in the *Shahnameh*, ending in the spatial matrix of Persian calligraphy.

## 8-Critical Evaluation:

Several important methodological and historiographical issues require critical consideration.

First, the relationship between mythology and history remains inherently problematic. The narrative of Tahmuras belongs to the domain of epic literature and cultural memory rather than historical documentation. Attempts to interpret mythological accounts as direct evidence for prehistoric events risk collapsing essential distinctions between symbolic narratives and empirical evidence (Lincoln, 1999). For this reason, the present study has treated the *Shahnameh* as a repository of cultural meanings rather than as a source of historical fact. The significance of the Tahmuras narrative lies not in its factual accuracy but in what it reveals about Iranian understandings of literacy, authority, and civilization.

Second, interpretations of the Jiroft discoveries remain contested. While Majidzadeh's research has stimulated important discussions concerning indigenous developments of inscriptional culture, scholarly consensus has not yet been achieved regarding the nature and implications of all inscriptional materials recovered from the region (Pittman, 2013). Consequently, caution is required when drawing conclusions from these findings. The present analysis emphasizes visual and formal characteristics rather than making definitive claims regarding linguistic content or script origins. Third, the concept of geometry itself requires careful treatment. Geometric organization should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of uniquely

Iranian cultural tendencies. Geometric principles appear across numerous ancient civilizations. What distinguishes the Iranian case is not the existence of geometry but the particular ways in which geometry became integrated into broader artistic and intellectual traditions.

A further limitation concerns the concept of continuity. While similarities may be observed between prehistoric inscriptional forms and later traditions such as Persian calligraphy, direct genealogical relationships cannot always be demonstrated. Historical discontinuities, cultural transformations, religious changes, and political ruptures complicate any simplistic narrative of uninterrupted development. The argument advanced in this article is therefore one of thematic continuity rather than direct linear inheritance. Despite these limitations, the interdisciplinary approach adopted here offers several advantages. By integrating archaeology, mythology, semiotics, visual culture studies, and cultural memory theory, it becomes possible to examine writing as a multidimensional phenomenon whose significance extends beyond conventional disciplinary boundaries. Such an approach reveals that writing operates simultaneously as material practice, symbolic form, political instrument, and artistic medium.

## 9-Conclusion:

The transition from oral memory to writing on the Iranian Plateau represents far more than the invention of a new communicative technology. It marks a profound transformation in the ways human societies organize knowledge, preserve memory, and construct authority. Through an interdisciplinary examination of the Tahmuras narrative, the archaeological evidence of Jiroft, and the later development of Iranian visual culture, this article has argued that writing should be understood as an ontological intervention into material reality. Inscription converts speech into object, memory into artifact, and authority into durable structure.

The mythological tradition preserved in the *Shahnameh* presents writing as a transformative form of knowledge acquired through confrontation with alterity. The figure of Tahmuras symbolizes the transfer of technical expertise into the center of civilization, transforming power from a purely physical phenomenon into a textual and administrative one. Archaeological evidence from Jiroft, while subject to ongoing scholarly debate, further demonstrates the importance of visual order within early inscriptional practices. The geometric organization of signs suggests that writing was not merely a vehicle for language but also a means of structuring space and material form.

Later artistic traditions—including manuscript painting and Persian calligraphy—continued to develop these relationships between language, geometry, and visual culture. In such contexts, writing became both image and text, simultaneously aesthetic and communicative. Ultimately, the history of writing on the Iranian Plateau cannot be reduced to administrative necessity alone. It is equally a history of symbolic order, political legitimacy, artistic innovation, and cultural memory. Writing emerges not merely as a record of civilization, but as one of the primary mechanisms through which civilization becomes possible.

## 10-Researcher & Artist Reflection:

As both a researcher and an active visual artist, I am continually drawn to moments in history when technical innovation becomes inseparable from transformations in perception. The emergence of writing represents one of those rare thresholds. What fascinates me most about the Iranian traditions examined in this study is the persistent refusal to separate knowledge from its physical form. Whether in mythological narratives, archaeological objects, manuscript painting, or calligraphy, writing repeatedly appears to me as something far more than language; it functions as a rigid visual structure through which cosmic and political order is imagined and materialized.

From my perspective within art history and studio practice, this relationship directly challenges modern Western distinctions between text and image. The written sign functions simultaneously as communication and visual composition; geometry becomes meaning, and form becomes memory. As an artist who has engaged with the physical act of making marks upon a surface, I find this historical continuity especially compelling. The somatic gesture of inscribing a surface remains one of humanity's most profound acts—an attempt to preserve abstract thought against disappearance and to create permanence within a transient world. When I analyze the geometric layouts of Jiroft or the calculated proportions of a Persian manuscript, I am not merely decoding data; I am retracing the bodily rhythms and spatial intelligence of the artisans who transformed oral memory into enduring form.

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